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SUBJECT: ACTIVISTS REFLECT ON IMPACT OF FEMALE GENITAL
MUTILATION CONFERENCE

Sensitive but unclassified. Not for internet distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Several active anti-FGM Embassy contacts believe that although the unified public condemnation of FGM at a November conference has not produced an official ban on the practice, it has raised the level of dialogue on the issue. The public discussion of the generally taboo subject of female sexuality, combined with the statements of prominent clerics against the practice, may eventually help to halt FGM. End Summary.

UNIFIED CRITIQUE A FIRST

¶2. (U) Prominent Muslim clerics from throughout the Middle East, Asia, and Africa condemned the practice of female circumcision at a November 2006 conference organized by the German humanitarian group Target entitled "Banning the Violation of Women's Bodies," held under the auspices of the influential religious institution, Dar Al-Iftah (House of Fatwas). While many religious leaders, including Coptic Pope Shenouda, have rejected the practice in the past separately, this widely-publicized conference was the first time so many spoke out in unison against the custom. FGM is estimated to be practiced on 96% of Egyptian Muslim and Christian women in varying degrees but generally involves the removal of most or all of the clitoris.

¶3. (U) Egyptian clerics, including the Sheikh of Al-Azhar Mohamed El Tantawi, made several public statements against the practice. Tantawi told the press, "From a religious point of view, I do not find anything that says that circumcision is a must (for women)...female circumcision has no legal justification." The influential Grand Mufti, Ali Gomaa, reiterated this stance, adding that he has not circumcised his daughter and is considering issuing a fatwa saying that FGM is not prescribed by sharia (Note: This fatwa has not been issued in the three months since the conference. End note.) Minister of Awqaf (Religious Endowments), Mahmud Hamdi Zaqaq, called female circumcision "an attack on the female that has no mental or religious justification in Islam," and it "may cause double harm on the body and spirit together."

¶4. (SBU) On January 20, Dr. Amna Nossier, an outspoken female scholar from Al-Azhar who attended the conference, told econoff that she has advocated a ban on the practice for nearly two decades, and is pleased that the conference brought attention to the issue. Nossier, who has conducted an extensive analysis of the Quran and Hadith for references to the practice, insists that "there is no document

prescribing circumcision for women." Nossier said that proponents manipulate interpretation of religious texts to justify it.

CONFERENCE IMPACT: ACTIVISTS WEIGH IN

¶15. (U) The exact impact of the statements of religious leaders on the practice of FGM will be difficult to quantify in the immediate future, but statistics clearly show that many ordinary Egyptians believe FGM has a theological basis. According to the USAID-sponsored "2005 Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey," (DHS) about 60% of those polled believe FGM is required by "religious precepts."

¶16. (SBU) According to Dr. Hanan Mohamed Agwa, who runs the Alexandria Family Planning Association, the clerics' statements "will have a positive impact" on reducing the level of FGM. Her organization works closely with local Muslim and Christian leaders, encouraging them to speak out against FGM. "Overall, I think the numbers are coming down, and the clerics' statements are key to raising awareness." At least on paper, people are changing their views. According to the DHS in 2005, 68% of women wanted the practice to continue, as compared to 82% in 1995. This is in part due to decade old efforts of numerous NGOs, including First Lady Suzanne Mubarak's National Council for Women (NCW), who run broad anti-FGM campaigns at the village level.

¶17. (SBU) Opinions differ in the NGO community on the necessity of fully banning FGM. Ambassador Moushira Khattab, Secretary General of the National Council on Motherhood and Childhood who consulted with the Mufti prior

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to the conference, believes that a legal ban is the answer. "Following the conference we decided we should demand legislation to ban the practice fully. The government, not just the religious community, needs to show that it is 100% against this practice." According to the Egyptian Center for Human Rights, an NGO that conducts education and outreach campaigns against the practice, the legality is irrelevant. "This is not about pushing for legislation because it won't convince people anyway. What we need to change are people's mentalities," says ECWR. A 1996 decree from the Ministry of Health and Population banned FGM in government hospitals, which has created a thriving underground market. According to the 2005 DHS, doctors still perform about 62-72% of circumcision, though generally done in private clinics and homes.

CONCEPTS OF TRADITION AND HONOR ALSO KEY

¶18. (SBU) Tradition and honor also play a considerable role in the perpetuation of FGM. ECWR's representative told econoff that while the clerics' statements are certainly a step in the right direction, "women are doing this to women based greatly on tradition... they need to be convinced why this is harmful to do to their daughters if it has been done to them." The concepts of modesty and chastity also play a vital role. According to ECWR, mothers are concerned that, without FGM, their daughters could have the stigma of being "promiscuous," which will make marriage prospects more difficult. "The concept is that circumcised women, with a potentially lower sex drive, will be more faithful to their husbands," said the representative. According to the DHS, 60% of polled females believe their husbands prefer them to be circumcised, and 54% believe it will prevent adultery.

¶19. (SBU) While official surveys show a very high rate of FGM, it is possible that this same concept of chastity may lead to over-reporting of the practice. GOE and WHO

statistics report a constant rate of 96% FGM over the past ten years, per verbal surveys and interviews, but not based on medical reports and exams. Medical exams from Embassy Cairo's Immigrant Visa section paint a markedly different picture. A random survey of fifty medical files of females over 12 years old, which includes a thorough medical screening, shows only about a 30-35% rate of female circumcision. While some of the applicants hail from more educated classes, which generally thought to have a slightly lower rate of circumcision, this is still a wide gap which could indicate that, for modesty's sake, some women do respond to oral surveys incorrectly, ashamed of the fact that they might be perceived as promiscuous if they admit to being uncircumcised.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) While this conference has yet to produce a legal or religious ban on FGM, all seem to agree that having prominent religious legal scholars condemn this practice is an important step in the right direction. Having male leaders publicly discuss and debate anything related to the taboo subject of women's sexuality is a notably positive development, though as activists have said, there is a long way to go before we see a measurable reduction in FGM.

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